

NEWS RELEASE



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West Henniker Dam Breaching Ceremony Held ***River restoration project to improve fishing, paddling***

Henniker, NH – The removal of the 10-foot high, 130-foot long West Henniker Dam will soon become a reality. A controlled breach was completed today in the solid concrete dam before an audience of community members, anglers, and paddlers who watched in anticipation of the river that will soon be restored. The dam's removal, which will take place over the coming weeks, will reconnect a 15-mile stretch of the Contoocook River for the first time in at least a century.

The project is made possible by a diverse public-private partnership with a shared dedication to restoring the Contoocook River, improving recreational opportunities and eliminating a public safety hazard. The N.H. Department of Environmental Services (DES) River Restoration Program is coordinating the project and the DES Dam Maintenance Crew is conducting the physical removal of the dam with funding from a variety of agencies and non-governmental organizations. The estimated cost of removing the dam is \$160,000.

"Today, we acknowledge the service this now-obsolete dam provided, and celebrate the restoration of a river. The removal of this dam returns the Contoocook to a free-flowing river to the benefit of both the environment and surrounding communities," noted DES Assistant Commissioner Michael Walls. The Contoocook River is one of a select number of rivers specially designated by the New Hampshire Legislature under the State Rivers Management and Protection Program.

The dam's removal will increase high quality recreational fishing opportunities that are important to the economy of New Hampshire. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has estimated that in 2001, anglers spent over \$160 million in New Hampshire. Anglers already enjoy excellent fishing in the Contoocook River and the dam's removal will further enhance fishing opportunities. The project will specifically benefit trout, Atlantic salmon and American eel.

"Our agency's contribution to this project is derived from a special account funded by anglers for the purpose of restoring fisheries habitat throughout the state," said Lee Perry, Executive Director of the N.H. Fish and Game Department. "The Fish and Game Department is pleased to participate in this exciting project, which will improve fisheries habitat and enhance the ability of fish to move through the system. This investment is certain to pay off for Contoocook River anglers."

The “Tookie,” as it is affectionately called by many, is also one of New England’s largest and most popular whitewater paddling destinations. The West Henniker Dam is located at the end of a two-mile long stretch of rapids with one legendary section aptly named “Freight Train Rapids.” Paddlers have strongly supported the project because the dam’s mere existence presents a dangerous safety hazard. Water spilling over the dam creates a current below the dam that is capable of trapping anyone who is washed over the spillway.

“The people of Henniker know we’re lucky to have such a beautiful river flowing through our community, and we have a vested interest in keeping it healthy,” said Peter Flynn, Town Administrator. “We’re looking forward to seeing more fish in the river, and knowing that it’s safer for people to enjoy. This project is a great opportunity for us and will strengthen our connection to the Contoocook even more.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is one of the project’s primary proponents and financiers. Michael Bartlett, supervisor of the Service’s New England Field Office said, “It sounds like a cliché but the removal of the West Henniker Dam is truly a win-win for everyone involved – the town, the federal and state agencies and the non-governmental groups. But the biggest winners of all are the fish and wildlife that call the Contoocook River home.”

The dam seen today was built in 1936, although previous dams are known to have existed in the general area as early as the 1780s. The current dam impounded and diverted water to a downstream paper mill that closed in 1987. The Town of Henniker took ownership of the property for unpaid taxes and learned in 2000 that the dam was in need of significant repair to meet state dam safety requirements. Recognizing the obsolete dam as a financial and legal liability, the town requested DES assistance in removing the dam. As part of the project, historical interpretive signage will be erected at the site in the future. Plans for the 12-acre riverfront property are currently under discussion in the community.

The project is made possible by financial and technical assistance from a diversity of partners including:

- N.H. Department of Environmental Services
- American Rivers – NOAA Community-Based Restoration Program
- U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA)
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Five Star Challenge Grant – NOAA Fisheries – USEPA
- USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program – FishAmerica Foundation – Norcross Wildlife Foundation – Wildlife Forever
- N.H. Fish and Game Department Inland Fisheries Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Program
- American Whitewater
- Town of Henniker
- Trout Unlimited – Basil Woods Chapter

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